

National Bank Open

Monday, August 12, 2024

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Karl Hale

Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome, everyone. We would like to welcome Karl Hale, the tournament director here at the National Bank Open, to make his end-of-tournament remarks. Karl, why don't you summarize things for the week.

KARL HALE: First of all, thank you for covering our event this week. There's a duality in today, you know, the end of a great tournament, and a great final with Jessica and Anisimova.

It was a fantastic week, culminating with record attendance, over 148,000. Our first weekend, 407 ETR Free Family Weekend, we had over 34,000.

Amazing ceremonies during the week, the Billie Jean King Cup, our unmatched conference with Venus Williams. We celebrated Michael Downey, his legacy as ex-CEO, Hatem McDadi, our SVP who started this whole process with all these players.

The fan enhancements were fantastic. Our partners are asking us to double the capacity of those experiences for our fans.

And then just great tennis on courts. We have a final with a Canadian, and also, if we move the border a little bit down south, we'll have another Canadian (laughing) in the finals.

So, a fantastic week of tennis and just thanks again for covering us.

THE MODERATOR: Who wants the first question?

Q. What do you attribute the record attendance to?

KARL HALE: I think there's a lot of things. Since 2014, Genie getting to the finals at Wimbledon, this whole initiative that this tournament has brought to tennis in Canada, growing the sport, that we've had essentially a decade now of tremendous success of Canadians, and also women's sport is doing incredibly well, our partners activated tremendously and supported us.

I think in Toronto we're now in the social fabric of Toronto where fans and non-tennis fans, they know about tennis and they know our players.

Q. Looking ahead to next year, you expanded to 12 days, what's the biggest challenge for you, for your team, and what's it going to look like 12 months from now?

KARL HALE: Well, we just finished our volunteer party, so we have to expand that program from 1,000 to 1,500. It's a 96-draw, a lot of players, so everything has grown by about 30 percent. Our team has to kind of work together to bring another excellent event, and we're really looking forward to it.

We surveyed our fans, and they're really excited about it, so we're looking forward to a great year of men's tennis, and having Felix and Denis lead the way.

Q. Any on-court moments or particular match that stood out for you this year?

KARL HALE: Good question. I think there's a few of them. I think yesterday's, you know, Navarro's match was a really kind of interesting match to watch, Bianca's match was a roller coaster, you know, on Tuesday night, Leylah's first match was great, some of Gaby's doubles. So, I think Canadians leading the way was what I was looking for.

Q. When this tournament ends I'm assuming you might take a little bit of a break, well-deserved break, but then when do you start getting into 2025 mode, and what's next for you or the first thing that you start looking forward to for next year?

KARL HALE: Ironically, the ATP is here today, and we've already walked the grounds with them, talking about what's going to happen next year. I was in contact with the players in Montreal on Friday when they had the rain, telling them, Hang in there, we're looking forward to having them here in Toronto, there's no rain in Toronto, they will be fine (laughing), and just looking forward to it. I think that we start really early, we started probably a year ago for the 12-day model, so we're well prepared for it.



Q. Equity is something you guys are big on. This year I think the prize pool here is 3.2 million and 6.8 in Montreal, that's a big gap, I know that you committed to 2027, how do you bridge that gap, and how do you get to that equality in three years?

KARL HALE: Yeah, it's not easy, but with our partners and with the WTA we work towards this, it's really important to us. We kind of led the way because it's important to women and women's sport.

We're going to get there in 2027, and it's just important to our tournament and to females in Canada.

Q. A lot of interest in mixed doubles coming off the Olympics. I know it's tough when you're in a split event with every year switching between Montreal and Toronto, but is there any appetite when you talk to other tournament directors to get mixed doubles more involved with the program at the 1000 level, be it a tournament or an exhibition?

KARL HALE: No (laughing). No, scheduling of a singles is really difficult with doubles alone. I think that the Olympics had a very hard time with three players in singles, doubles, and mixed doubles, so the appetite for us is not to do a mixed doubles event.

Q. With the Game.Set.Equity, I'm just curious how it came together that you would get the PWHL players involved, and how you felt that went?

KARL HALE: Yeah, I thought it was great. The players loved it. Our team put it together a little while ago, everybody participated, so, yeah, we're really happy with the way it went and how people talked about it.

Q. With the increasing need for mental health in sports, how did the tournament help the players, how did the tournament adapt its resources and support for the players?

KARL HALE: So, we have a Relaxation Zone, which is the best on the tour. I went there pretty much every day, and I tried to take people through to show them it, and I couldn't take them in because there was a lot of players using them, so, really, really popular.

We had these note cards that we gave to the players as well, and a lot of them were reading those notes from our fans.

We had a mental health panel and Naomi Osaka led the way, who is one of the leaders in this.

We had a yoga session with Bianca, a dog session, so we had so many different things. That program is continually expanding, it's really important, not just for women, but for men as well, so we'll continue to expand that program. I think, on the tour, we're probably the leaders on the tour.

Q. Another question about the expansion next year, are you planning to expand further on the site, or are you going to create a new building, or how are you going to meet the demand for the more players next year?

KARL HALE: If you can help us do that we would welcome it, but our site is restricted. The only thing that we are looking at off site is maybe some practice courts at the beginning of the tournament, that's the only type of expansion as far as facility we're talking about, but no, we'll be in the same footprint as this year.

Q. The social media team this time has been really good with fan engagement and player appearances and things like that. How do you see that impacting attendance for one, and then how would you have that adapt to the next tournament that's coming up?

KARL HALE: Yeah, I mean, we have a tremendous team that's been, as you can see, they're getting a lot of content from all of the different areas, and it's really important to the tournament to get that non-tennis fan, because we're doing well with the tennis fan, we want to expand our market, so they help us capture that.

Next year, with the 12-day model, we'll do much more with that. Also, our marketing team starts the program basically in January, getting much heavier as we get to the tournament, so we'll continue with our campaign, you know, it's Feel Tennis, I'm not sure if that's what it's going to be next year, but we'll see what we come up with and we'll continue.

Q. Bigger draw, potentially more Canadians in the draw, you mentioned Denis and Felix, but Marina won a match here. What excites you about the next generation that's coming up?

KARL HALE: That's a good question. It's a 96-draw next year, I believe we get eight wildcards next year, so that really helps our development.

The development team works in that capacity of what players are ready for, for that level of play. We had pretty good results here as far as Marina, that's her first 1000 series win, so she's on her way. She had a tough match today in quallies, lost, but a good match, so she's breaking through into that top-100 level.

The development team will choose the next juniors, but I was talking with them, and they have a bunch of younger players that are kind of 14 age, so in a few years we'll see a next wave come through.

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